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Shabonee's Account of Tippecanoe

By J. WESLEY WHICKAR

I found recently a description of the Battle of Tippecanoe by Shobonier, an Ottawa Indian, who became a Potawatomi chief, and this with the description by Judge Isaac Naylor, whose home was in Crawfordsville, gives two good accounts of the Battle of Tippecanoe. One from a white soldier, the other from an Indian brave, both participating in the battle. In a publication entitled *Me-Won-I-Toc*, which was written in 1864 by Solon Robinson, who gives the following account of the Battle of Tippecanoe by Shobonier.

SHABONEE'S DESCRIPTION OF THE BATTLE OF TIPPECANOE.¹

It was fully believed among the Indians that we should defeat General Harrison, and that we should hold the line of the

¹Shabonee or Shobonier a Potawatomi chief, grand nephew of Pontiac, born on the Maumee River, in 1775, died in Morris, Grundy County, Illinois, July 17, 1859. His father was an Ottawa who fought under Pontiac. The son, who was a man of fine parts and magnificent presence, and was one of Tecumseh's Lieutenants, fought by his side when he was killed at the battle of Thames. Becoming incensed at the treatment of the Indian allies by the British commander, he with Sauganash transferred their allegiance to the Americans. Joining the Potawatomi, among whom he married, he was chosen peace chief of the tribe, and was their spokesman at the council with the representatives of the Government at Chicago in August 1836. In the Winnebago and Black Hawk wars he performed invaluable service for the white pioneers, time and again saving the settlements from destruction by timely warnings. When the Winnebago rose in 1827 he visited the Potawatomi villages to dissuade them from taking up arms, and at the village on Geneva Lake, Wisconsin, he was made a prisoner and threatened with death. As the white man's friend he encountered the ill will of a large part of the Indians, but his influence over his own tribe was sufficient to restrain it from joining in a body of forces of Black Hawk, who twice went to Shabonee in person and tried to enlist him in his cause. Shabonee held his tribe and remained true to the whites. As a council of the allied tribes in February 1832, Shabonee espoused the cause of the whites and endeavored to convince Black Hawk that his proposed uprising would only bring disaster to the Indians. Unsuccessful in his endeavor, he and his son mounted their ponies at midnight, and starting from a point near the present Princeton, Illinois, warned the settlers both east and west of the intended outbreak, Shabonee finally reaching Chicago in time to put the inhabitants on their guard. The Sauk and Foxes in revenge attempted many times to murder him, and killed his son and his nephew. In 1836 the Potawatomi migrated beyond the Mississippi, Shabonee went with them but returned shortly to the two sections of land at his village, at the Pawpaw Grove in De Kalb County, Illinois, which the Government had awarded him under the treaties of July 29, 1829 and October 20, 1832, as a reward for his services. At the solicitation of his tribe he joined them again, but pined for civilization, and in 1855 again returned to find that speculators had bought his two sections of land at public sale on the grounds that he had abandoned it. The citizens of Ottawa, Illinois, then bought him a small farm on the South Bank of the Illinois River, two miles above Seneca, Grundy County, on which he passed his remaining

Wabash and dictate terms to the whites. The great cause of our failure, was the Miamies, whose principal country was south of the river, and they wanted to treat with the whites so as to retain their land, and they played false to their red brethren and yet lost all. They are now surrounded and will be crushed. The whites will shortly have all their lands and they will be driven away.

In every talk to the Indians, General Harrison said:

Lay down your arms. Bury the hatchet, already bloody with murdered victims, and promise to submit to your great chief at Washington, and he will be a father to you, and forget all that is past. If we take your land, we will pay for it. But you must not think that you can stop the march of white men westward.

There was truth and justice in all that talk. The Indians with me would not listen to it. It was dictating to them. They wanted to dictate to him. They had counted his soldiers, and looked at them with contempt. Our young men said:

We are ten to their one. If they stay upon the other side, we will let them alone. If they cross the Wabash, we will take their scalps or drive them into the river. They cannot swim. Their powder will be wet. The fish will eat their bodies. The bones of the white men will lie upon every sand bar. Their flesh will fatten buzzards. These white soldiers are not warriors. Their hands are soft. Their faces are white. One half of them are calico peddlers. The other half can only shoot squirrels. They cannot stand before men. They will all run when we make a noise in the night like wild cats fighting for their young. We will fight for ours, and to keep the pale faces from our wigwams. What will they fight for? They won't fight. They will run. We will attack them in the night.

Such were the opinions and arguments of our warriors. They did not appreciate the great strength of the white men. I knew their great war chief, and some of his young men. He was a good man, very soft in his words to his red children, as he called us; and that made some of our men with hot heads mad. I listened to his soft words, but I looked into his eyes. They were full of fire. I knew that they would be among his men like coals of fire in the dry grass. The first wind would

years. He received an annuity of \$200 from the Government for his services in the Black Hawk War, which, with contributions from his friends, kept him from want. A monument consisting of a large granite boulder, was erected over his grave at Evergreen cemetery, at Morris, Illinois, October 23, 1903. Shabonee's name is appended to the treaties of Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, August 19, 1825 and July 29, 1829; and Camp Tippecanoe, Indiana, October 20, 1832; and Chicago, September 26, 1833. *Bulletin 30 Part 2. Hand Book of American Indians.* Bureau of American Ethnology, 517.

raise a great flame. I feared for the red men that might be sleeping in its way. I, too, counted his men. I was one of the scouts that watched all their march up the river from Vincennes. I knew that we were like these bushes—very many. They were like these trees; here and there one. But I knew too, when a great tree falls, it crushes many little ones. I saw some of the men shoot squirrels, as they rode along, and I said, the Indians have no such guns. These men will kill us as far as they can see. "They cannot see in the night," said our men who were determined to fight. So I held my tongue. I saw that all of our war chiefs were hot for battle with the white men. But they told General Harrison that they only wanted peace. They wanted him to come up into their country and show their people how strong he was, and then they would all be willing to make a treaty and smoke the great pipe together. This was what he came for. He did not intend to fight the Indians. They had deceived him. Yet he was wary. He was a great war chief. Every night he picked his camping ground and set his sentinels all around, as though he expected we would attack him in the dark. We should have done so before we did, if it had not been for this precaution. Some of our people taunted him for this, and pretended to be angry that he should distrust them, for they still talked of their willingness to treat, as soon as they could get all the people. This is part of our way of making war. So the white army marched further and further into our country, unsuspecting, I think, of our treachery. In one thing we were deceived. We expected that the white warriors would come up on the south bank of the river, and then we could parley with them; but they crossed far down the river and came on this side, right up to the great Indian town that Elskatawwa had gathered at the mouth of the Tippecanoe. In the meantime he had sent three chiefs down on the south side to meet the army and stop it with a talk until he could get the warriors ready. Tecumseh had told the Indians not to fight, but when he was away, they took some scalps, and General Harrison demanded that we should give up our men as murders, to be punished.

Tecumseh had spent months in traveling all over the country around Lake Michigan, making great talks to all the warriors, to get them to join him in his great designs upon the pale

faces. His enmity was the most bitter of any Indian I ever knew. He was not one of our nation, he was a Shawnee. His father was a great warrior. His mother came from the country where there is no snow, near the great water that is salt. His father was treacherously killed by a white man before Tecumseh was born, and his mother taught him, while he sucked, to hate all white men, and when he grew big enough to be ranked as a warrior she used to go with him every year to his father's grave and make him swear that he would never cease to make war upon the Americans. To this end he used all his power of strategy, skill and cunning, both with white men and red. He had very much big talk. He was not at the battle of Tippecanoe. If he had been there it would not have been fought. It was too soon. It frustrated all his plans.

Elskatawwa was Tecumseh's older brother. He was a great medicine. He talked much to the Indians and told them what had happened. He told much truth, but some things that he had told did not come to pass. He was called "The Prophet." Your people knew him only by that name. He was very cunning, but he was not so great a warrior as his brother, and he could not so well control the young warriors who were determined to fight.

Perhaps your people do not know that the battle of Tippecanoe was the work of white men who came from Canada and urged us to make war. Two of them who wore red coats were at the Prophet's Town the day that your army came. It was they who urged Elskatawwa to fight. They dressed themselves like Indians, to show us how to fight. They did not know our mode. We wanted to attack at midnight. They wanted to wait till daylight. The battle commenced before either party was ready, because one of your sentinels discovered one of our warriors, who had undertaken to creep into your camp and kill the great chief where he slept. The Prophet said if that was done we should kill all the rest or they would run away. He promised us a horseload of scalps, and a gun for every warrior, and many horses. The men that were to crawl upon their bellies into camp were seen in the grass by a white man who had eyes like an owl, and he fired and hit his mark. The Indian was not brave. He cried out. He should have lain still and died. Then the other men fired. The other Indians

were fools. They jumped up out of the grass and yelled. They believed what had been told them, that a white man would run at a noise made in the night. Then many Indians who had crept very close so as to be ready to take scalps when the white men ran, all yelled like wolves, wild cats and screech owls; but it did not make the white men run.

They jumped right up from their sleep with guns in their hands and sent a shower of bullets at every spot where they heard a noise. They could not see us. We could see them, for they had fires. Whether we were ready or not we had to fight now for the battle was begun. We were still sure that we should win. The Prophet had told us that we could not be defeated. We did not rush in among your men because of the fires. Directly the men ran away from some of the fires, and a few foolish Indians went into the light and were killed. One Delaware could not make his gun go off. He ran up to a fire to fix the lock. I saw a white man whom I knew very well—he was a great hunter who could shoot a tin cup from another man's head—put up his gun to shoot the Delaware. I tried to shoot the white man but another who carried the flag just then unrolled it so that I could not see my aim. Then I heard the gun and saw the Delaware fall. I thought he was dead. The white man thought so, too, and ran to him with his knife. He wanted a Delaware scalp. Just as he got to him the Delaware jumped up and ran away. He had only lost an ear. A dozen bullets were fired at the white man while he was at the fire, but he shook them off like an old buffalo bull.

Our people were more surprised than yours. The fight had been begun too soon. They were not all ready. The plan was to creep up through the wet land where horses could not run, upon one side of the camp, and on the other through a creek and steep bank covered with bushes, so as to be ready to use the tomahawk upon the sleeping men as soon as their chief was killed. The Indians thought white men who had marched all day would sleep. They found them awake.

The Prophet had sent word to General Harrison that day that the Indians were all peaceable, that they did not want to fight, that he might lie down and sleep, and they would treat with their white brothers in the morning and bury the hatchet. But the white men did not believe.

In one minute from the time the first gun was fired I saw a great war chief mount his horse and begin to talk loud. The fires were put out and we could not tell where to shoot, except one one side of the camp, and from there the white soldiers ran, but we did not succeed as the Prophet told us that we would, in scaring the whole army so that all the men would run and hide in the grass like young quails.

I never saw men fight with more courage than these did after it began to grow light. The battle was lost to us by an accident, or rather by two.

A hundred warriors had been picked out during the night for this desperate service, and in the great council-house the Prophet had instructed them how to crawl like snakes through the grass and strike the sentinels; and if they failed in that, then they were to rush forward boldly and kill the great war chief of the whites, and if they did not do this the Great Spirit, he said, had told him that the battle would be hopelessly lost. This the Indians all believed.

If the one that was first discovered and shot had died like a brave, without a groan, the sentinel would have thought that he was mistaken, and it would have been more favorable than before for the Indians. The alarm having been made, the others followed Elskatawwa's orders, which were, in case of discovery, so as to prevent the secret movement, they should make a great yell as a signal for the general attack. All of the warriors had been instructed to creep up to the camp through the tall grass during the night, so close that when the great signal was given, the yell would be so loud and frightful that the whole of the whites would run for the thick woods up the creek, and that side was left open for this purpose.

"You will, then," said the Prophet, "have possession of their camp and all its equipage, and you can shoot the men with their own guns from every tree. But above all else you must kill the great chief."

It was expected that this could be easily done by those who were allotted to rush into camp in the confusion of the first attack. It was a great mistake of the Prophet's red-coated advisers, to defer this attack until morning. It would have succeeded when the fires were brighter in the night. Then they could not have been put out.

I was one of the spies that had dogged the steps of the army to give the Prophet information every day. I saw all the arrangement of the camp. It was not made where the Indians wanted it. The place was very bad for the attack. But it was not that which caused the failure. It was because General Harrison changed horses. He had ridden a grey one every day on the march, and he could have been shot twenty times by scouts that were hiding along the route. That was not what was wanted, until the army got to a place where it could be all wiped out. That time had now come, and the hundred braves were to rush in and shoot the "Big chief on a white horse," and then fall back to a safer place.

This order was fully obeyed, but we soon found to our terrible dismay that the "Big chief on a white horse" that was killed was not General Harrison. He had mounted a dark horse. I know this, for I was so near that I saw him, and I knew him as well as I knew my own brother.

I think that I could then have shot him, but I could not lift my gun. The Great Spirit held it down. I knew then that the great white chief was not to be killed, and I knew that the red men were doomed.

As soon as daylight came our warriors saw that the Prophet's grand plan had failed—that the great white chief was alive riding fearlessly among his troops in spite of bullets, and their hearts melted.

After that the Indians fought to save themselves, not to crush the whites. It was a terrible defeat. Our men all scattered and tried to get away. The white horsemen chased them and cut them down with long knives. We carried off a few wounded prisoners in the first attack, but nearly all the dead lay unscalped, and some of them lay thus till the next year when another army came to bury them.

Our women and children were in the town only a mile from the battle-field waiting for victory and its spoils. They wanted white prisoners. The Prophet had promised that every squaw of any note should have one of the white warriors to use as her slave, or to treat as she pleased.

Oh how these women were disappointed! Instead of slaves and spoils of the white men coming into town with the rising sun, their town was in flames and women and children were

hunted like wolves and killed by hundreds or driven into the river and swamps to hide.

With the smoke of that town and the loss of that battle I lost all hope of the red men being able to stop the whites.

I fought that day by the side of an old Ottawa chief and his son, the brother of my wife. We were in the advance party, and several of those nearest to me fell by the bullets or blows of two horsemen who appeared to be proof against our guns. At length one of these two men killed the young man and wounded the old chief, and at the same time I brought him and his horse to the ground. The horse ran, before he fell, down the bluff into the creek, quite out of the way of the whites. The man's leg was broken and he had another bad wound. I could have taken his scalp easily, but Sabaqua, the old chief, begged me not to kill him. He wanted to take him to his wife alive, in place of her son whom the white brave had killed.

I was willing enough to do this for I always respected a brave man, and this one was, beside, the handsomest white man I had ever seen. I knew him as soon as I saw him closely. I had seen him before. I went to Vincennes only one moon before the battle as a spy. I told the governor that I came for peace. This young man was there and I talked with him. He was not one of the warriors but had come because he was a great brave. He had told me, laughingly, that he would come to see me at my wigwam. I thought now that he should do it. I caught a horse—there were plenty of them that had lost their riders—and mounted the white brave with Sabaqua behind him to hold him on and started them off north. I was then sure that we should all have to run that way as soon as it was light. The Indians were defeated. The great barrier was broken. It was my last fight. I put my body in the way. It was strong then, but it was not strong enough to stop the white men. They pushed it aside as I do this stick. I have never seen the place since where we fought that night. My heart was very big then. Tecumseh had filled it with gall. It has been empty ever since.²

²For a further description of the Battle of Tippecanoe by eye witnesses, see *Indiana Magazine of History*, Vol. 2, pages 163-184, journals of Judge Isaac Naylor and Col. John Tipton. The account is also printed in the *Report of the Tippecanoe Monument Commission*, by Alva O. Reser, 1909.

Solon Robinson gives the following account of Tecumseh's return, in *Me-Won-I-Toc*:

This chieftain was in Georgia or Florida at the time of the battle and knew nothing of it or its results until late in the winter. He did not meet with the success that he had hoped for upon his mission and he returned sad and dispirited with the little body-guard that accompanied him on his trip south. He crossed the Ohio river near Shawneetown and kept up the edge of the Grand prairie, thus avoiding all the settlements on the Wabash. Opposite the point where the river bends eastward from its general north and south course, the party struck off east and crossed over to the south side of the river to visit some friends at Shawnee prairie. [He crossed the Wabash river at the Baltimore hill, north of Covington, at what is now known as the Bend.]

It was night when they crossed the army trail, or Tecumseh would have read in it the explanation why he did not find his friends where he expected to meet them. He thought that for some reason the Prophet had called in the scattering families, concentrating them around his town. He did not dream of the great disaster that had fallen upon that town. He did not look about him the next day with the usual sagacity of an Indian, who reads a long history in a few little signs such as a white man might pass unnoticed. He arrived after dark in the evening on the site of the Prophet's town, without having met a single soul to give him any information. His heart had begun to misgive him. How it must have sank down to the zero of despair when he neither saw a light nor heard one sound of life, where but a few months before he had left such a stirring community.

"In a single moment," as he afterward told Shobonier, "I realized that I was a ruined man. My mission to my mother's native land and her brothers had failed. I could not induce them to come where the water turns to stone and the rain comes from the clouds in showers of white wool and buries every green thing out of sight. I had shut my eyes all the way so as not to see the beautiful country that would soon be trampled under the feet of the hated white men. I was going from a sunny clime to one of ice and snow, and I thought that although it might lie deep and cold upon the roof of my wig-

wam, I should find a warm fire within. And that thought kept me warm through all the chilly nights of that long journey. If I was hungry, I said I can bear it, for I know that my people on the Wabash have plenty of corn, and my friends, the English, give them great stores of cloth, blankets, guns and powder for their furs. But when I came to this land of plenty and looked for my warm home and my young wife to welcome me, I heard no voice and saw nothing but darkness. Then my heart was black. I knew at once the cause of all this desolation. I saw the marks of the great white general that I had defied in his own council house, in every blackened brand of the burned town. I stood upon the ashes of my own home, where my own wigwam had sent up its fire to the Great Spirit, and there I summoned the spirits of the braves who had fallen in their vain attempt to protect their homes from the grasping invader, and as I snuffed up the smell of their blood from the ground I swore once more eternal hatred—the hatred of an avenger. I am now going to strike these foes. Will my red brethren go with me?"

A few went, not all, for the charm that had held them fast to the great chief was broken. He might swear vengeance over his ruined wigwam and all the homes of his people, but he could not wipe out the blood of that battle-field, nor heal the festering wounds of a hundred disabled warriors. Nor could he regain his lost prestige. If in a single moment he realized that he was a ruined man, he continued to realize it all his life.

He no longer declared that Elskatawwa was a Prophet and possessed of supernatural powers and knowledge. He called him by a most degrading epithet, that means far more than "fool."

The next summer after the battle of Tippecanoe, war was declared between the United States and England, and then Tecumseh appeared in a new character—a brigadier general in the British service, and commander-in-chief of all the Indian allies of that power. He fought a severe battle at Fort Meigs, Ohio, May 5, 1812, and another, perfectly desperate, at the Moravian Towns, on the River Thames, Canada, in the Autumn of 1813, where he laid down his life fighting for his country, and to avenge wrongs which he felt had been inflicted upon him by the Americans.

He was still a young man at the time of his death, strong and hearty, well-formed in body, limb and features. His height was about five feet ten inches and always erect.